

# Pandemic Influenza (Flu)

## *Frequently Asked Questions* for Federal Employees



1. **What is an influenza pandemic?**

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. It occurs when a new influenza strain emerges for which there is little or no immunity in humans. It can cause serious illness to people worldwide.

2. **Is a pandemic imminent?**

Three influenza pandemics have occurred in the past century: the Spanish Flu in 1918-19, the Asian Flu in 1957-58, and the Hong Kong Flu in 1968-69. Many scientists believe it is only a matter of time until the next pandemic occurs. However, the timing and severity of the next pandemic cannot be accurately predicted.

3. **How would an influenza pandemic affect communities and businesses?**

In an influenza pandemic, possibly 30% or more of the workforce will be absent due to illness or due to assisting sick family members. Large-scale absences can affect every aspect of daily life, including public transportation, communication systems, utilities, businesses, and even food supplies. Local communities, schools, civic organizations, and businesses will have to work together to plan for a pandemic response.

4. **Will this year's annual flu vaccine protect people against an influenza pandemic?**

No, *this year's* flu vaccine will not protect people against an influenza pandemic. Annual flu vaccines are designed to protect against the most common flu strains prevalent in a given year. By definition, a pandemic strain is a new strain that has not appeared before and therefore existing vaccines provide little or no protection.

5. **Can a vaccine be made to protect against an influenza pandemic?**

Technically, a vaccine can be made to protect against an influenza pandemic. However, it is scientifically challenging to produce a vaccine before the actual pandemic flu virus appears. It generally takes at least 6 months or more to develop, test and mass-produce a new vaccine. Because transmission could be rapid, millions of people could already have been infected during that time.

6. **What is the difference between a vaccine and an antiviral?**

Vaccines are preventive medication usually given by injection before an outbreak occurs to stimulate an immune response that protects against the virus. Antivirals are medication treatments for those who have already been infected by a virus or to minimize or prevent infection for persons recently exposed.

7. **What role does my agency play in preparing for a pandemic?**

Each agency is developing a response plan to help ensure that essential operations continue during a pandemic. This plan should include the following:

- Reliance on alternative workplace schedules
- Flexible hours to reduce the number of employees at the worksite at any given time
- Procedures for staying away from the workplace if employees or those who live with employees are displaying symptoms of flu
- How work will be prioritized
- Plans for backing up employees who are absent
- Protocols for initiating communication to keep employees informed about day-to-day situational changes during a pandemic

8. **Will my agency provide vaccine or antiviral medication to me during a pandemic?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), individual states, and other public health authorities will work with vaccine manufacturers and distributors to distribute any available medications as rapidly as possible to those in need. In some cases, employers may have a distribution role if some or all of their employees are determined to be essential service providers. For now, however, the answer for most Federal employees is probably “no”.

9. **How can I help my agency to prepare for a pandemic?**

There are a variety of ways in which you can help your agency prepare, including:

- Stay current on advice to the public on pandemic preparedness. An excellent resource is the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) pandemic flu site: <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>.
- Discuss pandemic plans with coworkers, family, and neighbors.
- Understand your role in your agency’s plan as well as other local pandemic plans.
- Consider volunteering to help with pandemic education efforts.

10. **What else can I do to prepare and protect myself?**

- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a handkerchief or tissue to minimize the spread of infectious droplets into the air. Use your sleeve if you don’t have a tissue.
- Wash your hands frequently. Rub soapy hands vigorously for at least 10-15 seconds before rinsing. Use an antiseptic hand wash solution if water is unavailable.
- Keep your hands away from your face to prevent the spread of germs from hands to vulnerable eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Because children are especially effective at spreading germs, teach hygiene practices and reinforce them regularly.
- Avoid sick people unless you are essential to their care. If you are sick, stay home!
- Get seasonal flu shots. It won’t provide direct protection against pandemic flu, but it may help to prevent the emergence of new flu strains.
- Practice an overall healthy lifestyle, with particular attention to your lungs. Quit smoking. Exercise. Keep existing lung problems under control.
- For a complete list of what individuals and families can do to prepare, go to: <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/pdf/guide.pdf>

11. **Should I wear a facemask if pandemic flu breaks out?**

Because the virus is easily spread by multiple routes, the use of masks, gloves, and gowns by the general public is not likely to prevent the spread of influenza. However, if you have the flu and are coughing and sneezing, you may provide some protection to people in the immediate vicinity by wearing a mask.

12. **What about other protection strategies and products being advertised?**

Keep a healthy skepticism about products that promise to reduce your risks before or during a pandemic. Check with your own health care provider, your Federal Occupational Health (FOH) nurse or other reliable sources such as the CDC if you have any questions about the effectiveness of specific practices or products.

13. **What role will FOH play during a pandemic?**

FOH Occupational Health Centers are not equipped to provide acute or extended care for influenza. However, FOH plays an important role in pandemic preparedness in the following ways:

- Provides training and education for agencies and their employees.
- Provides up-to-date pandemic-related information to customer agencies.
- Provides agencies with an in-depth review of pandemic plans.
- Provides vaccinations (if available) according to CDC recommendations.
- Distributes antivirals (if available) should HHS approve such a plan.
- Provides counseling and stress management services.
- Procures and distributes protective equipment where appropriate.

You can lessen the impact of a pandemic. Begin by educating yourself about what can happen during a pandemic outbreak and what actions you can take. For more information, contact your local FOH Occupational Health Center, visit our website at [www.foh.dhhs.gov](http://www.foh.dhhs.gov) or call **(800) 457-9808**.